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Calif. City to Honor Columbia Astronauts

By ALICIA CHANG



For decades, engineers worked behind the gates of a sprawling plant in this blue-collar city, designing and building parts for America's space program including the shuttle Columbia.

The 160-acre complex closed in 1999 and with it, the city's reputation as an aerospace hub.

Now the city is reclaiming its aerospace past by converting part of the site into a memorial and the first education center dedicated to the 2003 Columbia disaster that killed seven astronauts.

The Columbia families say it's appropriate because the astronauts spent 16 days in orbit conducting science experiments. Shuttle flights since have focused on finishing construction of the international space station.

"This crew, in particular, has always been an ardent supporter of education. A science center would certainly be a fitting tribute to their legacy," said Dr. Jon Clark, an ex-NASA flight surgeon and widower of astronaut Laurel Blair Salton Clark.

Design plans reveal a futuristic-looking, two-story building nestled in a 13-acre park on the former site that has since been redeveloped into a shopping center, movie studio and medical complex. The facade will be made of steel, glass and aluminum to invoke the feeling of openness.

"The goal is to give the impression of space and the space shuttle," said Alex Guerrero, executive vice president of Tower General Contractors, which is building the science center.

Interactive exhibits are planned including a simulated space mission and a Mars robotic lab.

Columbia broke apart during re-entry on Feb. 1, 2003, raining debris over Texas and Louisiana. Investigators determined its left wing was gashed by fuel-tank foam insulation during liftoff, allowing fiery gases to penetrate the shuttle.

The Downey complex, 20 miles south of downtown Los Angeles, opened in 1929 and was primarily involved in aircraft manufacturing and missile design. During the space race, it played a key role in development of the Apollo program and later, the space shuttle fleet.